Desert Archaeology – A Commentary

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How many weary centuries has it been
About those deserts blown!
How many strange vicissitudes has seen
How many histories known!

Sand of the Desert in an Hour-Glass
By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

For those who do not habitually visit or live in them, deserts can often be ambiguous spaces commonly perceived as hostile, dangerous terrain where missteps and minor misfortunes can quickly become life threatening. Yet, from a comfortable distance, deserts can also seem mysterious and exotic, alluring destinations for those who wish to escape the hustle and bustle of modern life and soak up the vast open landscapes and star-studded night skies above. The hardships of desert living and the necessity of careful adaptations for desert dwelling are, of course, real, but some of the mystique that surrounds the world's deserts in Western imagination may be misplaced, at least when they are viewed from the perspective of those more accustomed to navigating their way across them and extracting livelihoods from the resources that can be found if one knows where to look.

Archaeological research on the antiquity, diversity and viability of desert life around the globe has a long, albeit patchy, history. Many of the early

expeditions during the nineteenth and early twentieth century into the Sahara, Gobi, Karakum, Atacama, Gibson, Mojave and Rub' al Khali, among others, generated a wealth of information about the physical traces of previous occupants alongside ethnographies of their indigenous inhabitants. Yet, aside from the work of a few dedicated researchers, desert archaeology has often had an undeserved reputation as being something of a niche pursuit. Fortunately, this is changing, and the last few decades have seen numerous articles, single-authored books and edited collections that have highlighted the enormous archaeological richness of the world's deserts (e.g., Barich et al. 2014; Rosen 2017; Sidebottom et al. 2008; Smith 2013; Veth et al. 2008).

The seven short papers here continue these traditions and open up several new dimensions of research. In terms of their geographical coverage, the selection is rather uneven with one each for Arabia, Africa and Australia, and four concerning South America. Despite this, the papers bear comparison on a number of fronts. Most obviously, the papers by Moulin, Boza Cuadros, Stone and Alaica and Gonzalez La Rosa, because of their common focus on desert landscapes of Peru and Bolivia, when read alongside each other provide a general understanding of the long history of desert living and navigation here from at least the Early Intermediate period to the modern day, and some of the broad commonalities of these experiences. There are obvious contrasts, however, not least between the particularities of life in a high-altitude desert setting as described by Stone, and the different challenges posed by the coastal deserts examined from diverse perspectives in the other three papers. All of these authors stress, in different registers, the importance of mobility, of routes, landscape domestication, and rituals. Alaica and Gonzalez La Rosa aim to approach the practice of herding domesticated llama and alpaca in the Peruvian coastal desert from the perspectives of the lowland, mobile pastoralists, arguing for a greater consideration of their agency in directing and engaging with the shifting political and social landscapes of more hegemonic ideologies of the Moche, Nasca and Wari empires. As they observe, the 'desert setting was not [just] a place that formed … a marginal environment', it was also 'a conquest opportunity'. Boza Cuadros similarly explores the different potentialities offered by desert settings, specifically

for ports and other points of embarkation and disembarkation along the Peruvian coast during the nineteenth century. While the manner in which new imperial needs were played out and realised undoubtedly differed from those of the pre-contact era, it is striking how similar concerns over water, lines of supply, and connectivity were shared across time, and how the agency of desert peoples could potentially both frustrate, or at least redirect, and enable imperial ambitions.

Ideas about agency and the intersection of routes through the Peruvian Coastal Desert also feature prominently in Moulin's paper, which tracks among other developments the gradual entrainment of mobility in this landscape with the expansion of Inca authority, the formalisation of roads where a more fluid meshwork of paths had previously existed. Yet, as a hub within this landscape occupying a critical node in the exchange networks between the interior highlands and coastal lowlands, the settlement of Tambo Colorado in the lower Chincha valley was able to retain, and perhaps even exploit, its ceremonial and religious potency and significance as a place of pilgrimage, even as other elements of this desert landscape were transformed.

The religious significance of persistence places, such as Tambo Colorado, within desert landscapes is also explored by Stone in her ethnographic account of dance pilgrimages to Mother Lake on the Andes Mountains' high Titiqaqa plateau, and the deep time continuities in belief and practice shaped by the particular emergent ecological contrasts these modern celebrations help sustain. Persistence is also an important theme in Bird and colleagues' discussion of places of memory in the inland Pilbara, Western Australia. A central question here is how did anticipation of long-term absences shape the way indigenous inhabitants of Australia's deserts marked these landscapes. As Bird and colleagues note, the intertwining of rock art and the mythological narratives of Dreamtime were one of the means by which Australian Aboriginals domesticated these places, but they would have needed other kinds of material mnemonics in landscapes that lacked suitable rock surfaces to inscribe. Careful analysis of the arrangement of structural features, the caching of grinding stones and others tangible signs of investment in site facilities, suggests that these rather ephemeral traces, despite appearances, were equally about

establishing permanence within a socially and demographically highly mobile form of dwelling.

Looking at things differently, looking at things that do not fit dominant interpretive models, and from alternate perspectives that envisage ideas of permanence, presence and absence, stability and mobility from indigenous forms of doing and being, and with the assistance of new technologies, are also themes in the papers by Breunig and Roberts and colleagues. For Breunig, the challenge is how to break free from an interpretive model of southern African rock art that has dominated the literature for over four decades but which has failed to account convincingly for certain kinds of imagery, such as that documented in some considerable detail for the Namib Desert. As he notes, with 'over 10,000 petroglyphs on over 900 distinct boulders or rock walls across approximately 200 sites' now documented, there remains an absence of the kind of depictions of symbolic behaviour, therianthropes and other supernatural beings found further south and east that have been interpreted as being trance-related. The imagery in north-west Namibia, by contrast, is largely naturalistic and from its distribution is suggestive of a level of territoriality not commonly associated with hunter-gatherers. Moreover, some of the art appears to have been deliberately defaced or otherwise damaged, hinting perhaps at inter-community hostility and perhaps violence. In this reading of the evidence, the desert, even for hunter-gatherers was a contested space, an idea not often encountered in the archaeological literature.

Another idea not typically associated with deserts, and considered in some detail in the paper by Roberts and colleagues, is of being 'crowded'. We are more used to thinking of deserts as sparsely occupied, and their naming, as in the choice of terms such as 'the Empty Quarter', often reflects that. Yet, the results from an ongoing project deploying a range of methods from remote sensing to 3-D scanning is highlighting just how crowded the desert of northern Qatar was in antiquity. The project has already succeeded in identifying a variety of classes of sites, regularities in their topographical and geographical locations and cardinal orientation, and evidence of multiple superimpositions of paths and their alignment with the pre-existing remains. Collectively, as the authors observe, the Crowded Desert Project is systematically dismantling a common belief

that past nomadic desert societies are somehow 'beyond the reach of conventional archaeological practices'.

Paths and mobility, agency and resilience, persistence, presences and absences, duration and dwelling, all emerge from these papers as important currents in desert archaeology today, weaving their own intellectual meshwork and lines of sight. 'The desert', as an idea, may continue to be seen by mainstream archaeologists as a liminal frontier space, useful perhaps to think with and to contrast with 'cultivated' places of civilization and commerce. Fortunately, papers such as those reviewed here give the lie to such binary constructs, reminding us in their different ways of the final stanza of Al-Munsif al-Wahaybi's evocative poem aptly entitled *The Desert*:

She was our first fountain, our mother,

who held us, then gave us away

to the age of waiting cities.

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